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TECH

The Co-Founder Of

Snopes Wrote Dozens Of Plagiarized Articles For The Fact-Checking Site

“You can always take an existing article and rewrite it just enough to avoid copyright infringement."

By Dean Sterling Jones

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David Mikkelson, the co-founder of the fact-checking website Snopes, has long presented himself as the arbiter of truth online, a bulwark in the fight against rumors and fake news. But he has been lying to the site's tens of millions of readers: A BuzzFeed News investigation has found that between 2015 and 2019, Mikkelson wrote and published dozens of articles containing material plagiarized from news outlets such as the Guardian and the LA Times.

After inquiries from BuzzFeed News, Snopes conducted an internal review and confirmed that under a pseudonym, the Snopes byline, and his own name, Mikkelson wrote and published 54 articles with plagiarized material. The articles include such topics as same-sex marriage licenses and the death of musician David Bowie.

Snopes VP of Editorial and Managing Editor Doreen Marchionni suspended Mikkelson from editorial duties pending “a comprehensive internal investigation.” He remains an officer and a 50% shareholder of the company.

“Our internal research so far has found a total of 54 stories Mikkelson published that used appropriated material, including all of the stories Buzzfeed shared with us,” Marchionni and Snopes Chief Operating Officer Vinny Green said in a statement.

"Let us be clear: Plagiarism undermines our mission and values, full stop," Marchionni added. "It has no place in any context within this organization."

Snopes’ editorial staff disavowed

Mikkelson’s behavior in a separate statement signed by eight current writers. “We strongly condemn these poor journalistic practices. … we work hard every day to uphold the highest possible journalistic and ethical standards.”

Snopes told BuzzFeed News it plans to retract all of the offending stories and disable advertising on them. It will also append an editor's note of explanation to each.

Said Mikkelson, “There is no excuse for my serious lapses in judgement. I’m sorry.”

“So I was browsing the news and came across an article on the CBS News web site about a horrific crime involving a Memphis woman charged with killing four of her children by slitting their throats with a butcher knife: Hmm, I

wondered, as I pondered the headline ("Memphis mom charged with grizzly butchering of 4 of her kids"), did this woman murder her children in bear-like fashion? Or was the mother of extremely advanced age?"

—Snopes.com/July 3, 2016

Meet Jeff Zarronandia. During a brief but memorable career, his byline, which linked to a bio detailing his Pulitzer Prize and his skill at mule-skinning, appeared on at least 23 Snopes articles on topics like Donald Trump's financial woes and false rumors about Hillary Clinton. His reporting made enemies of hoaxsters and fabulists across the political spectrum, including former Trump campaign adviser Roger Stone and the late “fake-news kingpin” Paul Horner, both of whom were unaware of his true identity.

"It's just a David Mikkelson alt,” Snopes' former managing editor Brooke Binkowski explained when BuzzFeed News inquired. "He used to write about topics he knew would get him hate mail under that assumed name. Plus it made it appear he had more staff than he had."

Between 2015 and 2019, Mikkelson regularly plagiarized reporting from other news outlets in an effort, he said, to scoop up traffic.

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In an interview with BuzzFeed News, Mikkelson attributed this behavior to his lack of formal journalism experience. “I didn't come from a journalism background,” he said. “I wasn't used to doing news aggregation. A number of times I crossed the line to where it was copyright infringement. I own that."

In an explanation about the website’s practices, Snopes informs readers that it “follows all industry guidelines for transparency in reporting” adding, “we think being transparent with readers is the coolest.” But the fact that Zarronandia was in fact Mikkelson was not disclosed anywhere on the site. Following BuzzFeed News’ inquiry, the Zarronandia author page has been removed, and the Zarronandia byline has been replaced with “Snopes staff."

Founded in 1995 by Mikkelson and his then-wife, Barbara Hamel, Snopes bills itself as "the internet's definitive fact-checking site," and is a two-time Webby

Award winner cited by the likes of the New York Times and the Washington Post. It served as one of Facebook's fact-checking partners between December 2016 and February 2019. But in recent years, the site has been troubled by a bitter ownership dispute.

Mikkelson's alias flies in the face of the site's mission, once described by the New York Times as "a quest to debunk misinformation online." It also highlights his penchant for trolling, something he was known for in the early 1990s, when he posted on Usenet forums under the handle "snopes." At that time, he was so strongly associated with trolling — even tricking advice columnist Ann Landers into running several prank letters — that the practice was sometimes referred to as “snoping.”

Similar pranks and allusions to trolling are littered throughout Snopes’ site. For example, a section called “The Repository of Lost Legends,” which forms the acronym “TROLL,” contains spoof fact-checks with titles like “Mister Ed was a Zebra.” Another article, “Do People Swallow Eight Spiders Per Year?” which was penned by Mikkelson as a lesson to readers to always check their sources, includes reference to nonexistent tech columnist "Lisa Birgit Holst,” whose name is, in fact, an anagram for "this is a big troll."

In an interview with BuzzFeed News, Mikkelson said that he created the Zarronandia pseudonym as a joke intended to mislead the trolls and conspiracy theorists who frequently targeted the site and its writers in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election.

“It was kind of a stress-relief thing [after] spending 20 years seeing people trying to discredit our work by just making stuff up about us,” Mikkelson said. “Let’s have some fun and watch these people vent their spleen inventing reasons why this nonexistent persona is biased.”

Knowingly misleading readers by using a fake name is considered unethical for many news outlets — especially one that markets itself as a bulwark of truth and transparency. Far worse is plagiarism.

BuzzFeed News found dozens of articles on Snopes' site that include language — sometimes entire paragraphs — that appear to have been copied without attribution from news outlets that include the New York Times, CNN, NBC News, and the BBC. Six of these articles were originally published under Zarronandia’s byline, three under Mikkelson’s own, and the rest under “Snopes staff.” Snopes’s subsequent internal review identified 140 articles with possible problems and 54 that were found to include appropriated material.

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"That was his big SEO/speed secret," said Binkowski, whom Snopes fired without explanation in 2018 (she currently manages the fact-checking site Truth or Fiction). “He would instruct us to copy text from other sites, post them verbatim so that it looked like we were fast and could scoop up traffic, and then change the story in real time. I hated it and wouldn't tell any of the staff to do it, but he did it all the time.”

Two other former employees also said that copying and rewriting content was part of Mikkelson's strategy for driving traffic to Snopes' site. One, who asked to remain anonymous, told BuzzFeed News that "taking credit for other people's work" was "part of his model."

Edward Wasserman, professor of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley who specializes in ethics, said that using other people's work "must be conducted subject to rules of attribution, so that the reader isn't misled into crediting the current writer with finding the information first, which is an important claim to credibility and proficiency." Many prominent news organizations, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, and BuzzFeed News, have acknowledged plagiarism in their own pages and publicly corrected the record, as Snopes is doing now.

The Zarronandia byline first appeared on the site in 2015 on an article that seems to have been plagiarized in its entirety, except for a few minor word changes, from a Reuters bulletin about Kim Davis, a Kentucky county clerk who refused to issue same-sex marriage licenses.

Reuters confirmed it does not currently have any licensing agreement with Snopes, but declined to answer questions about any past agreements. A spokesperson told BuzzFeed News, “Any use of Reuters material that is not licensed for publication must abide by applicable copyright laws and must, at a minimum, be clearly attributed.”

Another Zarronandia article, an obituary of David Bowie, pieces together paragraphs from E! Online and the LA Times, using near-identical phrasing and sequencing.

Emails and Slack messages seen by BuzzFeed News suggest that, over the course of at least two years starting September 2014, plagiarism may have been routine practice for Mikkelson.

In one Slack message from January 2016, Mikkelson detailed his strategy for copying and then quickly rewriting articles after publishing. “Usually when a hot real news story breaks (such as a celebrity death), I just find a wire service or other news story about it and publish it on the site verbatim to quickly get a page up. Once that’s done, then I quickly start editing the page to reword it and add material from other sources to make it not plagiarized,” he wrote.

In two emails from 2014 and 2015, Mikkelson told staff to “pop over to one of our competitor sites (urbanlegends.com or hoaxslayer.com), pick something out that they’ve recently published that we haven’t covered,” and "rewrite it just enough to avoid copyright infringement."

> **“Rewrite it just enough to avoid copyright infringement.”**

In other emails from around the same time, Mikkelson described his vision for the site’s future “as a platform for traffic-generating junk that people would complain about if it were on ‘classic’ snopes,” including articles copied from "viral item of the day" sites. Mikkelson did not dispute the authenticity of any of these exchanges and attributed them to his poor understanding of how news gathering works. "I don’t think rewriting news stories is all that remarkable," he said. "It’s a pretty common practice when done correctly.” But, he added, “I really sucked at it.”

Speaking with BuzzFeed News, former Snopes writer Kim LaCapria — now with Truth or Fiction — said she never complied with any of Mikkelson's directions to copy content, as she was used to doing original journalism “without copying in a short period of time.”

“I remember explaining that we didn't need to ‘rewrite’ because we'd always done this stuff quickly,” she said, adding that “he just didn't seem to understand that some people didn't plagiarize.”

In keeping with Snopes' tradition of giving its writers zany backstories, Zarronandia's bio jokingly claimed that he "won the Pulitzer Prize for numismatics in 2006" and was "also the winner of the Distinguished

Conflagration Award of the American Society of Muleskinners for 2005." (There is no Pulitzer prize for numismatics — commonly known as coin collecting — and the "American Society of Muleskinners" does not exist.) A fake Twitter profile helped to embellish his backstory, describing him as a "Pop culture buff" and "Proud bacon fanatic" from Pocatello, Idaho.

But it wasn't until Zarronandia began covering the 2016 US presidential election that the eccentric persona seemed to develop a life of his own.

There was much to debunk. Russia's infamous troll factory was working overtime to sow discord. A group of Macedonian teens were making a small fortune in ad revenue running pro-Trump fake news sites. Trump's own campaign strategist Steve Bannon was busy “flood[ing] the zone with shit."

That August, the Zarronandia byline appeared on an article defending Khizr Khan, who'd made headlines after denouncing then-candidate Trump in an impassioned speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. The speech spawned a slew of right-wing conspiracy theories, among them one that claimed Khan was a deep state operative on the Clinton Foundation payroll.

“Completely lacking from this narrative is any actual evidence whatsoever that Khizr Khan has, or has ever had, any 'deep legal and financial connections' to Hillary Clinton,” Zarronandia wrote.

The article caught the attention of

former Trump adviser and self-professed “dirty trickster” Roger Stone, who in his book *The Making of the President 2016* identified Zarronandia as one of Clinton's “supporters in the media” — apparently unaware that no person by that name existed. (Stone also referenced Zarronandia in his 2019 book, *The Myth of Russian Collusion: The Inside Story of How Donald Trump REALLY Won*.)

"Everything Snopes has ever reported regarding me has been boilerplate bullshit," Stone told BuzzFeed News after this article was published. "If the guy using a pseudonym wrote about me I am completely unaware of it so I guess you can tell him to cancel his victory lap. ... He has no credibility. Reporters who cite him as a source are laughed at, shouted down and their credibility is pummeled. Sorry but you are giving these ineffective asswipes far too much credit."

The Zarronandia byline appeared again in November 2016, in an article debunking unfounded claims that then-president Barack Obama had overruled Trump's election victory and scheduled a revote.

“There was no truth to this story,” Zarronandia explained, adding that the false claim had “originated with a malware site that uses the illegally appropriated trademarks of legitimate news organizations in order to spread fake news on social media and generate advertising revenues.”

Although Zarronandia didn’t specify the “malware site” in question, a search optimization tag at the bottom of the page suggests he was referring to “abcnews.com.co,” a fake news site created by self-proclaimed “hoax artist” Paul Horner, who relished in trolling inattentive readers with clearly fabricated news stories.

Horner was livid, and in a Facebook post shortly before his death said he planned to sue Zarronandia for claiming “my website has malware, when of course it doesn't.”

BuzzFeed News was unable to find any evidence for Snopes' malware claim. Asked for comment, Horner's younger brother JJ said he didn't recall Horner "using anything like that or him mentioning it," although Horner would have found it "hilarious" to learn of Zarronandia's true identity. His brother, JJ said, "fucking hated Snopes."

"Jeff Zarronandia at Snopes should return the Pulitzer he won."

Other highlights from Zarronandia's fake career include an honorary mention in the online journal of the Numismatic Bibliomania Society, which seemed to recognize the joke, and a critique of his work by the right-wing site Newsbusters, which did not, arguing with a straight face that he "should return the Pulitzer prize he won in 2006."

The practice of using fake bylines is not new. In 2012, *This American Life* found pseudonyms on more than 350 stories, published across several major US newspapers, that were sourced from now-defunct content farm Journatic and its sister company Blockshopper. Though some journalists may claim to have legitimate reasons for using a pseudonym — a dissident reporting from an authoritarian country, for example — the practice is widely frowned upon. It is especially unusual for the head of a site like Snopes to write stories using both his own byline and a pseudonym, potentially implicating Mikkelson in the same kind of deceptive behavior that the site has spent more than 25 years interrogating. The situation has left Snopes' current staffers mortified.

"Although none of us was to blame for the actions of Snopes' co-founder, we empathize with the journalists whose work was appropriated," they wrote. "This simply should never have happened."

Snopes.com Memo

> In late July/early August, members of this company began a comprehensive internal investigation into allegations of plagiarism leveled against Snopes Founder/CEO David Mikkelson after a journalist got in touch with us about his own research for a story.
> The journalist, Dean Sterling Jones, shared with Snopes Managing Editor Doreen Marchionni more than two dozen examples of what appeared to be sentences or

> paragraphs from various news sites pasted into Snopes news stories without appropriate attribution. Most of the stories were published roughly between 2014 and 2016 under a generic "Snopes Staff" byline or under the defunct pseudonym "Jeff Zarronandia."
>
> The offending content was typically often aggregated "breaking" and “odd” stories on various subjects originally reported on by other news organizations. In his research, Jones said he also spoke with former employees, who alleged Mikkelson had sent memos to

> staff during that time that could be construed as him encouraging unethical reporting practices.
>
> Marchionni contacted Snopes COO Vinny Green and the company's outside human resource consultant, Mary Jo Ray, about how best to proceed. Upon informing Mikkelson of the allegations, Marchionni has had free rein to conduct an investigation into the issue. Mikkelson has been cooperating with the newsroom on all related efforts.
>
> We want to thank Jones for his reporting. It's an example of

dogged, watchdog journalism we cherish. Our staff has moved quickly to fix the problem, and we now want to share with our community what we have done:

- Marchionni suspended Mikkelson from all editorial production pending a final outcome to the internal review and removed his access to our content management system,WordPress, for story production/publishing.
- Expanding on Jones' findings, Green flagged all 140 news articles under the generic bylines for review and identified other possible issues beyond

> Buzzfeed's findings.
>
> - A staff reporter, who also works as an adjunct journalism professor, examined each flagged post for plagiarism. Marchionni then verified her initial findings with the help ofplagiarism detection software. Our internal research so far has found a total of 54 stories Mikkelson published that used appropriated material, including all of the stories Buzzfeed shared with us.
> - On Snopes.com, the offending content will be removed while the page itself will remain accessible. An

> editor's note on each post will explain the source-attribution problem in the original story and link to the original news source(s) (Associated Press, ABC News, etc.) that should have been credited.
>
> - We are in the process of archiving and retracting all of the offending stories, along with disabling any monetization features on those posts. We will attempt to contact each news outlet whose reporting we appropriated to issue an apology.
> - The Snopes staff has embarked on a comprehensive

> review of the website's archives, focusing initially on the author archives, to identify any other discrepancies or room for improvement.
>
> - Marchionni is developing a comprehensive byline policy that answers any questions the community might have about how the generic "Snopes Staff" byline has been used in the past and how it is used today, among other issues.
> - Marchionni is reevaluating decisions Mikkelson made years earlier to not allow Snopes stories to be archived on the Wayback Machine and is

> empowered to make any changes necessary.
>
> Let us be clear: Plagiarism undermines our mission and values, full stop. It has no place in any context within this organization. We invite readers to let us know here if they find any other examples of plagiarized content so that we can apply the same treatment as above.
>
> We talk often in the newsroom about the priceless value of reputation — that we are worth no more than the credibility we maintain with our community. Our reputation is dependent on

> our ability to get things right, and more importantly, to quickly correct the record when we are wrong. We are committed to a lifetime of atonement through the rigorous pursuit of the facts, especially in scenarios such as this.
>
> To the staff, past, present, and future, who are undoubtedly impacted by these findings, we are deeply sorry. While an individual's actions have caused this breach of our ethics, we hope the extraordinary writers and editors who work at Snopes do not see their efforts and

> reputation undermined by these missteps. We can say without hesitation they are among the most gifted, dedicated, and brightest employees we have ever had the honor to work with, and we learn from them daily.
> *—Doreen Marchionni, vice president of editorial/managing editor Snopes.com*
> *—Vinny Green, chief operations officer for Snopes Media Group*

Snopes Staff Memo

> We, the writers of Snopes, feel it is incumbent upon us to clearly and publicly acknowledge that Buzzfeed has discovered incontrovertible evidence that the co-founder and CEO of Snopes, David Mikkelson, has written and published multiple articles which contained sentences taken from other sources without proper attribution. We strongly condemn these poor journalistic practices. No writer participated in this behavior,

> nor did any editors — Doreen Marchionni, Camille Knox, and David Emery — support or encourage these practices. We have all been held to very high journalistic standards, both by our editors and by our audience. Although none of us was to blame for the actions of Snopes' co-founder, we empathize with the journalists whose work was appropriated. This simply should never have happened. Under the leadership and guidance of Marchionni, Knox, and Emery, we work hard every day to uphold the highest possible journalistic and ethical

> standards, and we believe our fact checks, original reporting and investigative work are a testament to those high standards. We are proud of our editors and proud of the work we do.
> *—Alex Kasprak, Dan Evon, Jessica Lee, Nur Ibrahim , Jordan Liles, Madison Dapcevich, Dan Mac Guill, Bethania Palma*

David Mikkelson's Statement

> The results of our internal audit confirmed that I engaged in multiple serious copyright

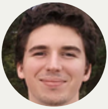
> violations of content that Snopes didn’t have rights to use. There is no excuse for my serious lapses in judgement. I am sorry. I have given full authority to our managing editor, Doreen Marchionni, to take any measures needed to address these issues.
>
> While I can’t change the past, I couldn’t be prouder of how Snopes has evolved since then. Snopes has grown beyond our roots as a “one-man band” website into a newsroom of dedicated, professional journalists who serve the public with trustworthy information.

> Thanks to their efforts, Snopes has published original reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic, the recent elections, Russian disinformation efforts and so much more. The last thing I ever wanted was to have my mistakes detract from their excellent work, and I’m doing everything I can to make it right.
>
> *—David Mikkelson*

UPDATE

August 27, 2021, at 11:02 a.m.

This story has been updated with comment from Roger Stone.



Contact Dean Sterling Jones at sterlingjones1989@aol.com.

Got a confidential tip? Submit it here.

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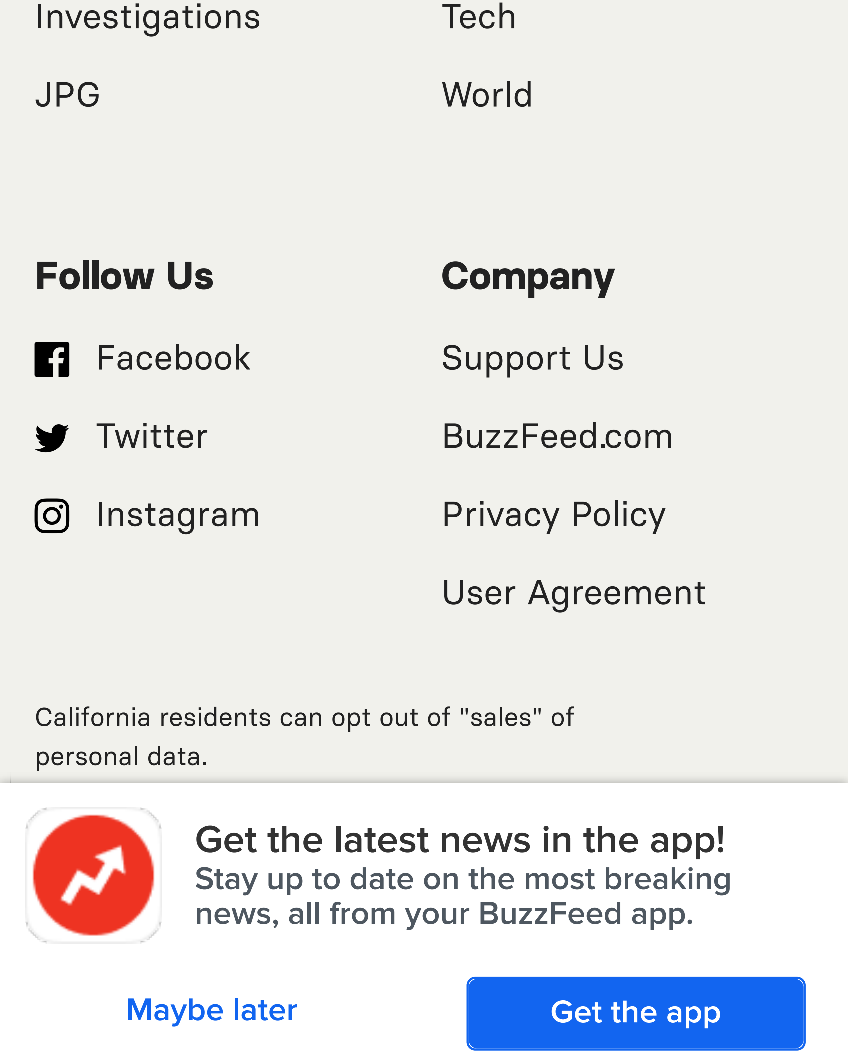

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